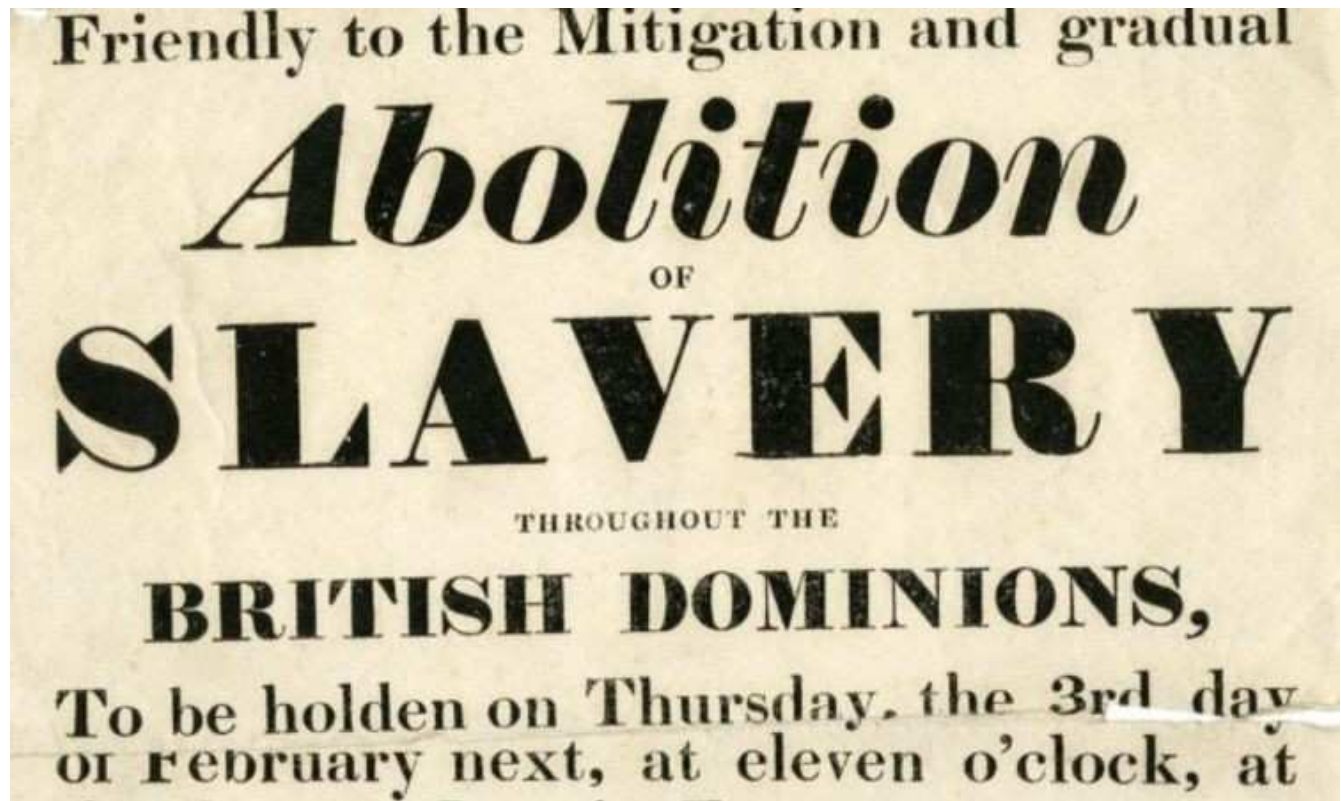


Abolishing the transatlantic slave trade and its after effects

An Analysis



This essay will not only identify the factors responsible for the abolition of Atlantic slave trade but will also comment on the impact of abolition on the economic and political fortunes of nineteenth century West Africa.

By the 19th century, the slave trade in the minds of major European powers had become “inconsistent with other economic pursuits.” For them, it was “no longer beneficial to the system as a whole” since profitability had to include the cost of production from the procurement of slaves and opportunity costs in moving them. This was the beginning of the “restructuring of the labor force” and integration of Africa into the world market, so there was a push to end the transatlantic slave trade. [1] The decentralized transatlantic slave trade was, by this time, mature: has been going on since 1440s when it was started by the Portuguese, and since that time, it was perfected as the geography of capturing people changed over time and exhausted populations. There had been a great degree of demographic exhaustion in West and Central Africa, and the geography of enslavement was its most expensive with the mechanisms of enslavement perfected by this time. In those areas closest to the coast there was demographic exhaustion, population was declining, and it was harder for those in such areas to reproduce by natural reproduction.

British elites, what some call capitalists, had begun to latch onto Adam Smith's beliefs, most notably expressed in the *Wealth of Nations* that: "human labor was the source of wealth," menial servants constituted 'unproductive labor,' and that slavery prevented enslaved peoples from applying their own initiative to their labor. Furthermore, the market would coordinate people's activities in the best way, and that those with unequal amounts of property would be on an equal playing field in a market. Additionally, Smith said that conditions such as mercantilism and slavery didn't "allocate resources in the most efficient manner." However, there was one main idea Smith articulated that British elites did not accept: his argument "against any attempts by the state to trade or conquer other lands." The reason for such rejection was partly because these European elites, in their view, had a need to "expand in a big way outside their national economies" and not rely on what Smith called a 'home advantage.' [2] There was something more: changes inside of Britain.

The system no longer needed enslaved laborers with the reorganization of the "labor market" since slavery had become a damper on further economic development of a capitalist form. [3] Simply put, industries wanted cheap labor. Some say that greater freedom of inquiry caused by the 'Enlightenment,' Africans being seen in more humanitarian terms, and an evangelical revival in the UK, US and elsewhere led to the slave trade's abolition. Others argue that there were a number of factors at play, including the fact that the British economy's prosperity no longer relied on the slave trade, a revival of religious feeling, humanitarian feelings, the French Revolution and ensuing British control of the seas. While the humanitarian factors were important, the economic factors made it possible for the abolishment of the slave trade to succeed. [4] Still, it is important to note that religion and racial perceptions played a bigger role in bringing about the abolition of the slave trade than the Abolitionist movement. As a result, the anti-slavery sentiment among the British population and the rise of evangelicalism was a small factor in pushing toward the slave trade's abolition.

The British elite realized that abolishing the slave trade would help achieve their strategic and economic interests. This change in attitude toward abolishing the slave trade came about for eight main reasons: the loss of America as a colony in 1783; British elite discovering that the slave trade's abolition would lead to greater profits; these same elite began to support Adam Smith's ideas; competition between the British and French ruling elite for domination of the Caribbean's slave plantations; the French Revolution; the revolt and independence of Haiti; the failed invasion of St. Dominique; and slaves in Jamaica who wanted to emulate those in Haiti. The last of these is the most vital because it created the idea, in the minds of British elites, of future revolts of enslaved laborers, increasing with continued import of such laborers from Africa. The Haitian revolution and slave revolts seemed to be major factors in abolishing the slave trade. It is important to remember that "only economic necessity...brought about abolition" of the slave trade in the British empire, with issues of "justice and humanity" remaining minor, some even saying that abolition would benefit the British empire.

There is something deeply disturbing about this. The fact that the slave trade ended for economic reasons, it wasn't profitable enough, undermines individual agency to push for change. Still, this doesn't mean that the Abolitionist movement was not important, but rather that it may have not gotten rid of the slave trade on its own. It also seems that the British abolished the slave trade to preserve

slavery. Clearly, the ending of the slave trade did not mean the end of the use of slave labor. The British were determined, signing treaties with the Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, French and 50 African rulers from 1810 to the 1830s. [5] The slave trade's abolition created immense opportunities for an international division of labor. This allowed elites to choose what type of labor their workers would engage in, which in turn led to increased specialization. [6]

This connects to the second part of analysis that this paper aims to address: the impact of abolition on the economic and political fortunes of nineteenth century West Africa. Let us not forget that the greatest 'losers' of the slave trade were "enslaved peoples of Africa and the Americas" while elites in Western Europe and North America were the 'winners.' [7] This does not mean that there were not more winners, like African elites, or that the 'winners' should be applauded and the 'losers' denigrated. Still, it must be recognized that in the 19th century, the slave trade was just as intense as in previous centuries: about 3.5 million were brought across between 1801 and 1867. [8] This brings up a question that deserves further research: Did the British and other European powers know that illegal transatlantic slave trading would continue even when it was abolished by their governments? If so, how did this affect the reasons why they codified the end of the slave trade? While some say that by 1860 the transatlantic slave trade had come to an end, but this is not completely correct. The slave trade ended at different times in different parts of the continent, with the slave trade being largely suppressed by European powers with African help by 1870. [9] As should be importantly noted, enslaved Africans came from "a region stretching from the Senegal River in northern Africa to Angola in the South." Europeans in this situation had a far greater capacity to end the slave trade than Africans. By this time in the 19th century, Africans can't step away from the slave trade even though they knew the brutalities it entailed because they were caught in a bind: either sell slaves or be sold. Before the Europeans had arrived, some states in Africa [had enslavement as a crime](#), which resulted in the corrupting of the judicial systems: "people were enslaved as punishment for a crime, payment for a debt or as a prisoner of war."

There were a number of immediate effects of the abolishment of the slave trade. British, German, French and other European powers became more aggressive using the slave trade's abolishment as a guise, overthrowing African rulers who didn't support their imperial interests and 'installed' those who did. [10] One direct example of this European intrusion was when the [British increased their naval presence](#) off the coast of West Africa resulting in the French increasing their presence in the region to counter the British, and then the British created their largest colony in Africa, at the time, in Nigeria, "when they occupied Lagos." More directly, the abrupt termination of the trade abruptly created a crisis: numerous areas had major social changes that had brought them "effectively into the service of the European slave trade" and their economies were devastated by the absence of the slave trade. [11] There were even overland military expeditions by Europeans and Africans to punish slave traders. Still, hierarchies of slavery [in place at the time](#) were carefully not abolished by the European powers and stayed in place until the 20th century. The drive of capitalism resulted in a new form of slavery being created: forced labor (de jure/de facto slavery). Slavery created as a result of the transatlantic slave trade was easily kept in place: the British naval blockade was not very effective, and the "slave...trade continued in many parts of Africa" as British efforts made the trade even [more profitable](#) since the price

of slaves had risen in the Americas. By the 1840s, only 10% British ships were dedicated to stopping the slave trade and up to 1870, only 22% of the ships participating in the illegal slave trade (1807-1870) were intercepted by this British blockade, some through illegal means, meaning that 88% of the ships made it through unscathed. As a result of the slave trade's continuation, there was an "expansion of domestic slavery" within Africa, all while African businessmen replaced the trading of slaves "with increased export of primary commodities." This is evident by the fact that, inhabitants of West Africa began organizing the sale of other commodities and luxuries as the slave trade ended. [12]

There is something vital that has not been said yet. After 1807, "certain Africans became unwitting allies of Europe," making it easier for Europeans to divide and conquer as they exploited "normal political conflicts" in pre-colonial Africa in the coming era of colonialism. [13] The slave trade's abolishment resulted in a "large European presence and willingness...to intervene in business disputes," tilting "the commercial balance toward the European side." Emerging colonialism and imperialism led to a rebirth of racism, cloaked in "humanitarian garb" and invoking racial superiority, used by abolitionists and slavery apologists alike. [16] In the end, Africa was about to be plunged into an era of death and destruction.

Notes

[1] Rodney, W. How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, 98 and Ajayi, J.F. Volume VI of the General History of Africa: Abridged Edition, 11.

[2] Rodney, 136.

[3] Rodney, 137.

[4] Ajayi, 28.

[5]

<http://www.brycchancarey.com/abolition/wilberforce.htm>, http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_155.html, Lovejoy, P. (2000). Transformations in Slavery: a history of slavery in Africa, Cambridge University Press, p. 290.

[6] Rodney, 177 and Inikori, J. E. (1992). The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe, Duke University Press, p. 9.

[7] Inikori, 9.

[8] Lovejoy, 19 and <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/~hfairchi/pdf/Blacks/MiddlePassage.pdf>

[9] Ajayi, 37.

[10] Rodney, 158.

[11] Ajayi, 30-31.

[12] Rodney, 141.

[13] Ibid, 144-5

[16] Inkori, 16.